

## Medienschow ohne Substanz? New Labour's Dritter Weg

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# Blair and his Critics

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In May 1997 the British Labour Party swept into power with a majority which exceeded all expectations. Many commentators in the 1980s had written off Labour's chances of governing again. Yet they were elected with more votes and more seats than they had ever won before. Nearly four million more people voted Labour than Conservative. Labour won 418 seats as against 165 for the outgoing Conservative government. On the left and centre of the political spectrum there was euphoria. An eighteen year era of neo-liberal government had come to an end. Many ordinary people were glad to see a divided, scandal-ridden, incompetent and out of touch Conservative government removed. A new government promising a more compassionate communitarianism and radical constitutional reform, a high priority for education and health, with a young, modern dynamic leader and realistic, achievable policies had arrived<sup>1</sup>.

In government New Labour, in its own words, 'hit the ground running'. It was well-prepared and quickly introduced a packed programme of measures. Throughout Europe politicians were closely examining Blair's revisionist 'Third Way' to see what could be learned. French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, elected weeks after Blair, and the Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, were seen not as Blairites but as more traditionally social democratic or Left-wing. Schröder, elected nearly 18 months after New Labour, used Blair's ideas a lot more and was keener to be associated with him, although Oskar Lafontaine is, like Jospin, more traditionally social democratic in his rhetoric. The Dutch Social Democrats were seen by many as forerunners to New Labour. In the 1998 Swedish elections politicians from different parties competed to compare themselves with Tony Blair. By 1998 there were social democrats or others on the Left in government throughout Europe - in countries such as Britain, Germany, France, most of Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria, Holland and the Czech Republic. After two years in government and the opening up of debate on the ideology, policies and practices of Britain's New Labour government, what does New Labour amount to and what do the critics have to say? As a fairly traditional socialist who believes in redistribution and greater equality I started a few years ago to examine New Labour expecting to be sympathetic to many of Blair's critics. A number of them do have strong, insightful things to say and there are limits to Labour's politics. Yet closer examination of New Labour led me to conclude that many of those criticisms also misunderstand New Labour or miss its merits.

## The Third Way and the Politics of New Labour

Blair has made a number of attempts to find a synthetic term or language to capture the meaning of his politics. He has often used the language of communitarianism or referred to the idea of 'stakeholding' to capture his emphasis on bringing back into society the socially excluded - to give them a stake in society. Most recently he has fallen on the term 'the Third Way'. Much has been made of the vague and malleable nature of this term. Social democrats have used it in the past to describe a path between capitalism and communism. Democratic socialists have talked of a Third Way between reformism and revolution. And the 1960s 'New Left', exemplified by figures such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, argued for a middle way between social democracy and Stalinism.

For Blair the Third Way is between old style social democracy and neo-liberal *laissez-faire*. Despite accusations that it is a vacuous slogan, it is here, for good or ill, that the substantive meaning of the 'Third Way' lies. It involves the acceptance of global free markets. But unlike the Right it sees a role for active government not only to capture the best from the market - actively intervening to encourage a high-skilled hi-tech economy which will attract capital - but also to equip individuals to find security, opportunities and community amidst its fast-moving winds. This is done through education and training to give workers skills and flexibility and children the basic standards of education they need to get on. It involves interventions such as a minimum wage, tax and benefits changes to make work more worthwhile for the unemployed, and training and work programmes to encourage individuals out of welfare dependency and social exclusion and into the labour market.

There are social democratic concerns for the worse off here but the Third Way is also different from old-style social democracy. Regulation and constraints on capital have been replaced by incentives to business and partnership with the private sector. The aim is no longer to restrict capital but to seek it as a friend. Keynesianism has given way to supply-side economics. Welfare is to be reformed away from universal, statist forms which, it is argued, encourage dependency to more selective, targeted measures aimed at assisting people off welfare and into the workforce. The balance is to be shifted from cash benefits to services which support job-seeking. Redistribution through tax and benefits is no longer a goal. The rights-claiming of social democracy is seen to be in need of a stronger emphasis on responsibilities owed in return. The Third Way departs from *laissez-faire* and old social democracy. It amounts to a difficult balance of dynamic free markets on one hand with community, security and cohesion on the other. This is a balance, it should be noted, which combines and juggles social democratic and neo-liberal elements, not one which abandons or goes beyond them as Blair and supporters such as Anthony Giddens and John Gray sometimes claim<sup>2</sup>.

Labour's approach to constitutional reform involves decentralisation through centralised leadership. The leadership of the Labour Party have increased their control over the selection of candidates and the dissemination of information. Many government decisions are made by Blair and key colleagues rather than by the Cabinet. Critics in his party complain that Blair consults Liberal Democrat leaders and unelected advisors more than he does the Labour Party or parliament. Yet Labour policies on the constitution will take power out of the hands of central government. Devolved assemblies for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, regional government for England, directly elected mayors, proportional representation, incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights, freedom of information: measures such as these provide countervailing centres of power to the UK Prime Minister, and liberal restraints and dilutions of the power of any government to rule with the degree of uncontested authority it can at the moment. For some critics this combination of centralisation with political pluralism is incoherent. Blair realises the paradox but does not see it as contradictory. For him the Third Way is, in part, about not falling into taking sides in old contradictions, but about going beyond, combining or balancing them. Where central government governs - for example in the field of constitutional reform - he wants it to be strong and effective in doing so. Where there are areas where power should be more restrained or devolved - to regions for example - then so it should be. Centralisation for the effective delivery of decentralisation. Where, for Blair, is the contradiction there?

Before the election Blair promised less adversarial politics. In Northern Ireland he has attempted to overcome a long history of bitter conflict and bloodshed through an historic peace agreement. He has established cross-party collaboration with the Liberal Democrats on areas where the two parties are in sympathy on policy. He has argued that the twentieth century was Conservative in Britain partly because the Centre-Left allowed itself to be divided. Reunification can be the basis for the twenty first century becoming that of the 'radical centre'. The 'Third Way' is, in part, about the re-unification, in the centre ground, of old false divisions. It is very much aimed at overcoming conflict and building consensus. There is a populist style to Blair's government. He has developed the use of group interviewing to gauge popular opinion and is seen by some commentators to be more in tune with the public than the Conservatives were. Some of his party members feel they are bypassed by his collaboration with the Liberal Democrats and his direct appeal to popular opinion. He seems to some to be a Prime Minister of the people more than a man of his party.

Much of Labour's political style is geared towards making only modest pledges that can be delivered, in an attempt to religitimate government after too many experiences of radical promises which have been betrayed. Before the election Blair combined a rhetoric of radicalism with constant incantations that the party would only promise what could be delivered. Spending limits were imposed. Spending pledges involved the redirection of expenditure from one area to another rather than new incomes taxes. And after personal and financial scandals under the Conservatives Blair promised to

keep his party clean. Ministers and advisers have resigned at even the merest hint of scandal, even where it has been denied or unproven. New rules on party funding and openness were introduced. Democratic reforms to the unelected House of Lords are in progress.

There is a distinctive cultural politics to New Labour. Blair believes that the liberalism and permissiveness of social democracy and the individualism of the New Right have eroded community. Rights and individual self-interest have been promoted to the neglect of responsibilities. There has, it is argued, been a decline in traditional institutions in society which ensure stability, opportunities and responsibility - standards in education, marriage and the two-parent family. How, for Blair, can this be countered? Post-war social democracy often saw the fostering of community as occurring through socio-economic means - taxation, universal welfare and comprehensive education, aimed at embedding common citizenship and reducing differentials. Under New Labour socio-economic measures such as welfare-to-work are important for inclusionary community, but many of the old socio-economic means have been ditched. Responsibility, high standards in education (rather than common structures) and good parenting are seen as key bases for building community. Labour also wish to articulate an identity of Britishness which stresses creativity, youth, compassion and outward-lookingness which can mobilise common purpose. The route to community is less socio-economic than in the past and more moral and cultural.

Some critics argue that New Labour is all about media presentation and lacks substance. New Labour certainly has the slickest public relations machine of any British political party in history. But what I have outlined so far should show that there is plenty of political and policy substance. Other commentators such as the sociologists Stuart Hall (a critic of New Labour) and Anthony Giddens (a sympathiser) argue that this substance lacks a guiding philosophy. It is pragmatic and theoretically vacuous. It has policies, chosen mostly in response to problems, governed by what is possible, but lacking an underlying philosophy. Without this Labour will suffer from lack of coherence, direction and meaning<sup>3</sup>. Yet this criticism is a bit tough. Labour sets out a social theory of what has happened in the world and makes clear ideological statements of principle to explain its position. Ideas of globalisation and the rise of a post-industrial era of flexibility and the creative industries are put forward to justify Labour's economic policy. Welfare to work policies are premised on ideas of welfare dependency, social exclusion and fiscal problems. And specific Labour policies on welfare-to-work, education and the family are linked to ideas about the desirability and necessity for communitarian inclusion and the combination of rights with responsibilities. Blair used his years in opposition to design a theory of social and economic change, a communitarian ideological outlook and a policy programme for government. This does not, perhaps, amount to a philosophy but does provide a clear ideological outlook. This was not the case to the same extent for Schröder, more pragmatic and with a less developed ideological outlook and detailed programme when he came to power.

## Social Democracy revived?

Blair himself argues that he is building on what Thatcherism left behind rather than rejecting it wholesale. Much of what Mrs Thatcher did was valuable and in many areas the changes she made have gone too far to be reversed. Privatisations and trade union reforms, for example, will mostly not be reversed. The aim is to move on from the ground which has been inherited but to do so guided by a more communitarian and compassionate philosophy and a role for more active government. Blair himself sees his project as a continuation of social democratic values. He rejects what he sees as the overly permissive and rights-based emphasis of old social democrats. Moral standards on teaching, parenting and criminal behaviour, for example, need to be restored. Rights (to benefits or education, for example) have to be matched with responsibilities (to accept training, search for work or provide good parenting). Otherwise, though, on the question of values, Blair sees himself like other social democrats of the past - concerned with equality, community, fairness and justice. But continuity on *values* is combined with a rejection of old social democratic *means* for achieving them. Keynesianism, top-down universal state welfare and public ownership are not, in the modern globalised world, the best means for achieving these. In place of these Blair has put supply-side economics, reform of the welfare state, welfare-to-work and education and training. Government is to be active but in giving people a lift back into the economy and off welfare dependency - not through manipulation of the economy or more and more benefits.

Yet Blair understates his radicalism with respect to Labour's past. Of course there are strands in Labour's past that Blair's ideas have continuities with - *very* old (pre-war) Labour, ethical socialism and social liberalism, for instance. But Blair himself has pointed out that, unlike previous Labour leaders, he was not born into the party or steeped and socialised into its values. His father, in fact, was a Conservative. And when you compare the continuities between the dominant ideas and policies in the Labour Party under Blair and the dominant ideas and policies in the Labour Party before Blair and since 1945 the discontinuities are quite marked. This is not to say social democratic *sentiments* do not live on, but the form they take in *values* and *policy* have changed. The last remnants of commitments to increased tax and spending, higher welfare benefits and renationalisation were cleared out by Blair. For him this involved getting rid of old means while the ends lived on. But for many social democrats such commitments were ends not means. Social democracy *was* the Keynesian welfare state and public ownership. Furthermore rejecting these techniques problematises some of the ends they were intended to achieve. They were the means for achieving equality and community. Without them such ends can no longer be sustained.

Indeed, with the change of means Blair seems to have redefined values such as equality, community, fairness and social justice. Roy Hattersley, former Deputy

Leader of the Labour Party, complains that equality, for New Labour, no longer means more equal economic outcomes. Greater equality of outcome has been replaced, in the explicitly stated words of Chancellor of the Exchequer Brown himself, by equality of opportunity<sup>4</sup>. Equality is about equalising opportunities for people to gain re-entry into society, primarily through access to the workforce. Measures such as welfare-to-work training schemes, employment advice, childcare and literacy classes are the main policies for greater equality - not redistribution of wealth and income but the provision of skills and support to those who are excluded from the labour market. Yet this argument can be taken too far. In Gordon Brown's budgets many small modifications to taxation, tax relief and credits, pensions and in-work benefits, alongside measures such as the minimum wage and the New Deal, redistribute resources from the better off to the working poor. Many of these reforms are aimed at inclusion in the workforce as much as at equality and benefit the working poor more than the non-working poor but there are still significant redistributive elements which reduce inequalities.

Similarly community has been redefined. Social democrats used to focus on socio-economic means for achieving community - common experience of universal welfare, classless comprehensive education and progressive taxation to reduce differentials. Socio-economic means live on - welfare-to-work and measures on literacy, for example - but many of the old socio-economic measures are out of favour and moral expectations have assumed a greater importance. Responsibility to society is expected less from private business than was the case according to traditional social democratic ideology. Proposals for making companies more accountable were dropped before the 1997 election. Now expectations of responsibility are more oriented to the individual citizen in terms of parenting, obligations to take up training, etc. Individuals are seen as responsible for their own behaviour more and are less seen as people whose problems are caused by society or solved by government. Social democratic communitarianism has become more moral and oriented to obligations required of the individual and less socio-economic and geared to corporate obligations to the community.

In the redefined equality and community the spirit of social democratic concerns with the less well off and with social responsibility lives on. But the form this takes has changed. There is discontinuity in the means and values that follow. While social democratic concerns are still evident at the level of sentiment, they are less so at the levels of values, means and policies. And with these shifts in the meaning of equality and community the remnants of the socialist critique of capitalism have gone. Labour is now a party which aims to run capitalism better than the Right, rather than to restrain, regulate or roll it back. Labour is more concerned with incentives for business and partnership with it than with curbing or socialising capital. The electoral and economic reasons for this orientation are often ignored by critics. An anti-capitalist party could not get elected and, if it could, capital would flee the country. But critics such as economics journalist Will Hutton who are sensitive to electoral and

economic pressures sometimes feel that New Labour has acquiesced to them more than it needed to<sup>5</sup>.

### **Globalisation and the Economy: neo-liberalism continued?**

Critics such as Hutton and Stuart Hall berate New Labour for giving in too much to neo-liberalism (although Hall is a harsher critic than Hutton). Labour has shifted from grudging acceptance of markets and capitalism in a mixed economy in the 1980s to fully-blown celebration of the free market. Blair seems to accept that free markets have won the battle of how to run capitalism best. Economic policy has given up on public ownership and Keynesian policies for growth and jobs. Soon after his election as Prime Minister, Blair urged other social democratic leaders that the days of such instruments were dead and social democrats had to modernise and adjust to flexible labour markets or die<sup>6</sup>. Labour economic policy has emphasised prudence, tight spending limits and no new income tax rises. The key to growth is not to spend more but to equip workers with skills to attract globally mobile capital and provide them with security in an insecure world. Yet, for the critics, this seems an ill-timed conversion to neo-liberalism. In Central and Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia the economic problems and social costs of the free market are becoming starkly clear. And other social democratic or Left parties who have inherited less of a neo-liberal political culture than Blair, believe, in principle at least, in more government intervention in macro-economic policy. Jospin in France, Lafontaine in Germany and Massimo d'Alema in Italy are not in complete harmony with Blair's views as set out here. For them, he has more in common with the economics of Clinton in the USA than with European social democracy. Blair has decided to go with the declining individualist and laissez-faire culture of Anglo-American capitalism rather than the more interventionist and collaborative traditions of Europe. Blair the moderniser seems out of touch with the modern world. He is, as they see it, a neo-liberal in what needs to be a post-neo-liberal era.

The key to Blair's conversion is said to be an over-timid acceptance of the globalisation thesis. For him there is little governments can do to control the economy in a world where capital can flow freely across national boundaries. Rather than fight capital flows it is better to go with them, to capture the best from the world of global capital instead of trying to regulate or curb it. Government's task is to balance free markets with institutions and norms which provide security and cohesion, rather than to restrain or direct those markets themselves. There is a role for active government. But it is in attracting capital rather than restraining it and in compensating for its worst effects rather than trying to prevent them. The role for active government breaks with previous Conservative administrations in Britain. But it also falls short of what traditional social democracy has meant by state intervention.

For the critics like Hall, Hutton and David Held this involves too much acquiescence to globalisation<sup>7</sup>. It forsakes the rare opportunity of a social democratic government in



Britain and the exceptional circumstance of social democratic parties simultaneously in power across Europe. European social democratic governments emphases may differ but their hearts are in roughly the same place and they come from traditions that emphasise intervention to regulate and constrain the activities of capital in the direction of wider public purposes. They could use their new co-existence in power to pursue combined macro-economic policies geared to growth and jobs and to pursue possibilities for political co-operation and governance in the service of social democratic ideals.

If there is economic globalisation there is also political globalisation. Political entities, governmental and non-governmental, exist at regional, supra-national, international and global levels. Economic globalisation can be countered by politically transnational strategies for growth, redistribution, requirements for corporate obligations to the community and regulations on capital. Where done by one state such measures may just prompt the flight of capital. But if done across Europe capital may be less able to flee skilled labour and consumer markets which may not be found easily elsewhere. One state may have little incentive to intervene in its own economy if this is more affected by the state of the global economy than by state policies. But combined governments of a larger important region in the global economy may have greater influence. Yet rather than exploiting and expanding the possibilities for transnational governance in the face of global capital, Blair is urging his social democratic colleagues in Europe to accept flexible labour markets and deregulation. For the critics there is a timidity here that throws away the rare chance to use global governance for social democratic ends.

Some of the criticisms misunderstand Labour's policies. It is argued, for example, that a better trained workforce is pointless without more jobs for them<sup>8</sup>. Yet the government's aim is that a more skilled workforce, especially in creative hi-tech industries, will attract capital to invest in new jobs. Labour cannot be seen as simply another Thatcherism Mark II<sup>9</sup>: it has introduced a minimum wage, signed the Maastricht Social Chapter, created a more serious welfare-to-work programme than previous training schemes, introduced radical constitutional reform, channelled government funding towards education and health, been more positive about Europe and introduced moderately improved trade union rights. All of these are symbolically and, in numerous small ways, concretely different from Thatcherism. Labour's timidity is probably due more to lack of analysis of the prospects for global governance than from cowardice or neo-liberal beliefs, as some suggest. Furthermore Gordon Brown is a leading signatory of the 'New European Way' put together by social democrat finance ministers. This contains Blairite Third Way ideas but also proposals for co-ordinated economic policies, exemption of capital spending from deficit controls, borrowing for public investment, counter-cyclical spending to prevent recession and create jobs and greater openness of the European Central Bank. On the surface, at least, these appear more Keynesian than Thatcherite.

But there is also truth in criticisms of New Labour's economic caution. Labour's macro-economic policies are similar to those of the previous Conservative government. Economic globalisation is perceived as an unstoppable phenomenon that cannot be countered. Labour's economic policies are built on the basis of this assumption. There is little attention to the possibilities offered by social democratic co-operation across national boundaries or political co-ordination on a transnational scale. Gordon Brown does wish to see the reform and greater transparency of global financial institutions. But, while an advance on the previous Conservative government, this falls short of the possibilities for global governance that many commentators feel Labour could be following. And lack of transnational co-ordination also means that their economic policy is a competitive one aimed at attracting investment at the expense of other countries - more nationalist and capitalist than solidaristic or socialist. But critics of the rightwards drift of Labour policies do not only have harsh words to say on lack of interventionism in the economy. They also complain about too much interventionism in moral and social life.

### **Conservative Authoritarianism?**

Many critics see the right-wing turn of New Labour thinking in their social as well as economic policy. Perceiving that possibilities of intervention in the economy are restricted, Labour has decided, it is said, to pursue social intervention and moral prescription instead. Labour's policies are aimed at cracking down on criminals and not just the social causes of crime. Prescriptions on the family and parental responsibilities, obligations required of the unemployed if they are to get benefits, night-time curfews on children, lecturing to teachers, bans on handguns. Here it is argued is a conservative authoritarian government. It has increasingly right-wing ideas about how people should live their lives and is happy to impose them, intruding into areas of their lives which should remain the sphere of personal liberty<sup>10</sup>.

There are two things going on in such arguments. One is that the content of Labour's social policies are increasingly those that have been associated with Conservatives and the Right. There is a subsequent squeezing out of progressive or Left-wing ideas on how people should live their lives - on teaching methods or family forms for example. This is not to say Labour politicians have not been conservative in the past. But there has been a breadth of conservative thinking guiding New Labour's *public* philosophy which is unprecedented. The second is the claim that the aim to impose lifestyle ideas on people is authoritarian regardless of the content of the norms that are required. Whatever the content of the values - Right or Left-wing - they are being imposed and this is illiberal. The first argument is one from the Left and is about the content of Labour's new norms. The second is more liberal and about the imposition of norms *per se*.

Before the election there certainly seemed to be a conservative and authoritarian direction to Labour's thinking. Increasingly conservative and less progressive norms

were being proposed on benefits-recipients, the family, education and lifestyle. Proposals for legislative and obligatory measures to enforce such norms were discussed. Warnings that the drift in conservative and authoritarian directions could go too far seemed well-placed. Not only Left-wing norms but also liberal freedoms seemed under question.

But for some the proper role of government is in solving problems in spheres such as education and the family if individuals are being failed by such institutions. Moral and social intervention is the role of government and governments would be failing in their responsibilities if they did not get involved in such areas where individuals were being let down and disadvantaged. For each and everyone of the areas mentioned above there is a strong justification for government to get involved. The important thing is not to keep government out of such areas but to make sure their interventions are subject to democratic checks and accountability. But even if this defence of intervention is not accepted the actual record of the government has not lived up to the warnings of authoritarianism.

Prescriptions on homework and literacy lessons in schools were followed through, for example. But the detailed content of the policies involve guidelines within which schools are allowed flexibility. Many teachers claim, in fact, that such guidelines are only telling them to institutionalise what they already did in a less formalised way. Home-school contracts, requiring responsibilities from parents and children, which it had been suggested could be compulsory, are to be voluntary. Family policy has asserted the preferability of children living with two married biological parents but has not included legislative or financial constraints or prohibitions on alternatives. Measures have been restricted mainly to extending advice and support for parents and families. Labour are accused of authoritarianism in their centralised style of government and control of the Labour Party. Yet centralised leadership has been used to carry out policies which increase constitutional limits and the devolution of government power. Many have argued that Labour's reforms will provide countervailing centres of power to centralised government, limits to government and will increase power-sharing between British parties and with Europe. Labour ministers are liberal on issues such as homosexual rights.

New Labour's approach to government has involved centralisation of power oriented, in part, at pursuing policies which diminish and decentralise government power. And while conservatism in the content of both economic and social policy has increased, warnings of the *authoritarian* imposition of conservative norms in social life have not been fulfilled. Criticisms of Labour's unwillingness to pursue opportunities for intervention in the global economy seem more firmly founded than those that see an overwillingness to legislate on private life. Over-conservatism on the economy makes New Labour vulnerable to the charge of spurning opportunities. Restraints on its conservatism in social policy undermine criticisms of coercion. The allegation of lack of socialism rings truer than that of lack of liberalism.

## **Whose Britain? Labour's cultural politics**

Yet for many the dangers in Labour's social policy are as much in what it says as in what it does. On questions of family and education, policies may well not be as authoritarian as feared. But the damage is symbolic. This brings us to Labour's language and rhetoric, its politics of identity and moral exhortation. Government is not just about policy but about moral tone, about culture as well as policy.

Whatever policies it follows in practice the government makes moral validations and judgements in its language and exhortation. Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw preface their remarks on the family with the qualification that lone parents and different family forms can provide good homes for children. But this is always a precursor to the argument that children living with two married biological parents will generally be better off than children in families with a step-parent, adoptive parents, a single parent or with gay parents. Whatever the detail of policy, or the evidence for such claims, the moral discourse validates married two parent biological families over others. Such rhetoric can alienate and invalidate forms of parenting that divert from the norm. Parents who do not fit the preferred norm may feel unvalued, unrecognised, and unsupported. They may feel stigmatised and antagonised.

Education Secretary David Blunkett and Tony Blair similarly preface their remarks on teaching standards with the view that most teachers are good. Yet this always precedes discussion of the problem of bad teachers. Beyond the detail of policy and the qualifications the end picture which is projected is of an education system afflicted with poor teaching. The last resort solution to schools performing badly has become to close them down, ask teachers to re-apply for their jobs, and appoint a new staff or a government team to turn the school around. A damning rhetoric is used to describe such measures - the 'naming and shaming' of 'failing' schools and the use of government 'hit squads'. The danger of such a rhetoric is that it is as likely to demoralise staff and leave them feeling alienated and unsupported as rejuvenate them into action.

The rhetoric can also be more positive. Mrs Thatcher did not convert British people to economic egoism but did give moral endorsement and political support to the 'get what you can' generation. A similar conjecture could be made about New Labour's cultural politics today. Blair articulates a moral discourse which is about compassion and inclusion, which counterposes community to individualism and expects responsibilities rather than just rights-claiming. The effect of Blair's moral discourse may not be to change hearts and minds but it may validate and support communitarian values where they exist. Not only can Blair's moral tone demoralise and alienate but, where people hold them, New Labour's rhetoric can confirm and encourage communitarian values. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Labour's attempt to

arrest and extradite General Pinochet was the symbolic endorsement and affirmation it gave to human rights concerns.

One element of Blair's attempt to rebuild community is to evoke a notion of British identity and values that people can commonly unite around and that can restore common purpose and confidence<sup>11</sup>. Blair has attempted to 'rebrand' Britain, rejecting Conservative equations of Britishness with individualism, Englishness, tradition, narrow nationalism and imperialism which are out of date and out of touch with modern multi-cultural popular identities. In the place of these values Blair appeals to 'creative' Britain arguing that the nation's strengths lie in the invention and creativity now exemplified by post-industrial hi-tech industries which, he argues, Britain is at the forefront of, as well as by the cultural industries - pop music and film, for example. We are a 'young country', excelling at 'young' industries in which young people and new identities are at the fore. The British people he argues are compassionate (rather than individualistic) as exemplified by their grief at the death of the humanitarian 'people's princess' Diana, and outward-looking (rather than narrowly nationalist). Blair wishes to establish common purpose around these values, which he identifies to be those of the people and also of New Labour, a party in touch with the people<sup>12</sup>.

Yet there are problems with this conception of Britain. Appealing to national values encourages the pursuit of national interests competitively at the expense of others or of global interdependence and can foster xenophobia. Benign national pride may not be so far from narrow nationalism as Blair likes to suggest. It can also fail to include or incorporate sections of its own community. Many people outside a Metropolitan media-conscious London elite may identify less with Blair's ideas of a young, modernising country strong in the cultural and creative industries. No amount of qualifications about how all identities count - even those that may be traditional, industrial, regional or ethnic for example - can disguise the general thrust of articulations of community like this. Blair's vision of a young country may not be a vision for everyone<sup>13</sup>.

Political programmes cannot be reduced to policy. They also provide a moral discourse which can validate and support or discourage and demoralise. Blair's cultural politics may provide a reaffirming period for communitarian morality after years in the wilderness. Yet Labour's appeal to 'modern' sections of the population could be at the expense of other identities - teachers and public sector workers, industrial or ex-industrial communities, the Scots and those outside the metropolitan post-industrial world of the cultural and hi-tech industries. Ironically many of these have in the past been traditional Labour supporters and their marginalisation could cause electoral problems. More importantly it may undermine the extent to which common purpose around shared themes can be mobilised and to which Britain can rid itself of social exclusion.

## Post-Thatcherism

New Labour is not social democracy revived, as Blair claims. The sentiments of social democracy remain and this is significant. But the old means of social democracy have changed, at Blair's own admission, and traditional social democratic values like equality, community and social justice have been redefined. New Labour espouse social democratic *sentiments* of community and concern for greater opportunities for the less well-off but with new *means* and *values* which are more liberal (in the case of equality) and conservative (in the case of community) than has been the case for social democracy in the past. This is not, however, Thatcherism Mark II as some critics complain. Economic policy has accommodated to a large extent at a macro-level to neo-liberalism and global markets. But measures such as welfare-to-work, the minimum wage, and Labour's constitutional reforms are modest but significant and symbolically important departures from Thatcherism. New Labour's cultural politics emphasise a moral message of community and inclusion which depart from the economic individualism endorsed by Thatcherism. The power of legislative coercion is not reached for sufficiently to justify the accusation of social authoritarianism. Yet Labour's cultural politics *are* prescriptive. Labour's discourse on the family, teaching and British national community threatens to demoralise and exclude some while its rhetoric and actions could also affirm and endorse communitarian sentiments.

New Labour is 'post-Thatcherite'. It rejects Old Labour and builds on and accepts many of the inheritances of Thatcherism. As such it is defined in part by coming after Thatcherism. But it is also *anti*-Thatcherite, guided by an antipathy to economic individualism and by a philosophy of communitarian inclusion. Labour is 'post-Thatcherite' because it is defined by Thatcherism yet departs from it. 'Post-Thatcherism' is a term that Blair has used himself to describe where he stands. But more recently he has chosen to term his 'project' the 'Third Way' - acceptance of free markets but with active government to ensure security and cohesion. Social democratic sentiments but a departure from the old statist means for regulating and manipulating the market. Blair wavers between emphases on the Third Way as something which is 'beyond' the old alternatives or a 'combination' of them. In fact, it is not *beyond* the old ideologies of Left and Right. The Third Way includes and *combines* elements of neo-liberalism on the market and social democratic sentiments about the excluded and community. The Third Way as a 'combination' of the old alternatives is a better description. Not 'beyond left and right' but 'both left and right'.

Is the 'Third Way', then, just opposites doomed to incoherence and contradiction? Stuart Hall argues that it is contradictory for New Labour to be communitarian and also talk about helping individuals to help themselves and to be modernising on the economy yet conservative in their view of the family<sup>14</sup>. Hall is right, of course, that communitarianism and individualism can contradict one another. But, as the Left have long pointed out, community - in the form of social bonds, the resources of society and social intervention - can also be a basis for individual freedom. For Blair the

community - active government, greater social responsibility and more cohesion and stability - is the means through which individuals can become autonomous and self-sufficient in the job market. Similarly modernisation of the economy can destabilise the family: via unemployment, social change and migration as was the case under Thatcherism. But industry and the family are also spheres where different principles can counterbalance - flexibility and change in the economy underpinned and counteracted by stability and security in the family, and providing the economic basis for stable families. Markets and modernisation can drive dynamism in the economy, and communitarianism protect security in society. Badly managed each pole can undermine its opposite, but each can also provide an antidote to the other. These do not provide necessarily undermining contradictions so much as tensions which require balancing. Blair may sometimes overemphasise the extent to which conflicting interests can be harmonised. But critics also underestimate possibilities for contradictory principles to be juggled, co-exist and counterbalance one another.

Allegations of the vacuousness and incoherence of New Labour are overstated. The important questions are not about whether Labour has direction, policies, substance or coherence or is all just an exercise in media presentation. The party has a distinctive post-Thatcherite identity which tries carefully to combine contrary principles. But are the ideas and policies desirable and can they work? These are the important questions. Labour suffers not from coercive authoritarianism, but from conservatism and *insufficient* interventionism. Labour's biggest weakness is its lack of will in the face of opportunities for supra-national political co-ordination in global markets in the pursuit of social democratic ends. Labour's socio-economic policies and their cultural politics can, to some extent, deliver more community and equality. But a rare window of social democratic opportunity has opened across Europe. Labour can exploit this through co-ordination with other social democratic governments in pursuit of egalitarian and communitarian ends. The question is whether Labour will join with such governments to grasp this opportunity or whether the chance will be allowed to fade away.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the analysis behind this paper was done jointly with Stephen Driver for our book *New Labour: politics after Thatcherism*, Cambridge, 1998 although he will not agree with all the conclusions I reach here. I am grateful to Stephen and Caroline Welsh for their comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Blair sets out his vision of the 'Third Way' in *The Third Way: new politics for the new century*, London, 1998. See also his collection of speeches *New Britain: my vision of a young country*, London, 1996, where he sets out the ideas that compose the Third Way although in the days before he had started to use the term 'Third Way' consistently. Many of the New Labour views outlined below can be found in this book as well as in numerous other speeches by Blair and his colleagues and in Labour policy documents. Another key theorist of the Third Way is sociologist Anthony Giddens in *The Third Way: the renewal of social democracy*, Cambridge, 1998. Giddens has been an important influence on New Labour. Ideas to do with globalisation and security which are part of the Third Way were prefigured in earlier books by Giddens. See, for example, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge,

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1990 and *Beyond Left and Right*, Cambridge 1994. Another influence on New Labour and the idea of the Third Way is ex-Thatcherite political theorist John Gray - see for example *After Social Democracy*, London, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See Giddens, *The Third Way* and, more critically, Martin Jacques 'Good to be Back' and Stuart Hall 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show' in *Marxism Today* November/December 1998. *Marxism Today* was, despite its name, a glossy popular pro-modernisation forerunner to New Labour in the 1980s. It closed down in 1991 but came back for this one-off issue in 1998. Many of its contributors were unhappy with the directions New Labour modernisation had taken and this issue collects together criticisms, such as those I discuss here, that have typically been made of New Labour.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Hattersley, 'Why I'm no Longer Loyal to Labour' *The Guardian* 26 July 1997; Gordon Brown 'The Anthony Crosland Memorial Lecture', London, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Will Hutton is author of the best-selling book *The State We're In*, London, 1995 and a regular contributor to *The Observer* newspaper.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Blair, 'Speech to the Party of European Socialists' Congress', Malmö, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> For Hall see 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', cited above while Hutton's views can be found in his regular newspaper articles. See David Held, 'The Timid Tendency' in *Marxism Today* November/December 1998. David Marquand, a former Labour MP and now Oxford academic, argues that New Labour are radical on constitutional reform but too conservative in their economics 'After Euphoria: the dilemmas of New Labour' *Political Quarterly*, 68, 4, 1997. This special issue of *Political Quarterly* gives a good range of different interpretations of New Labour.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', cited above, p.12

<sup>9</sup> As well as the references by Hall cited above see Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, 'Blair: is he the greatest Tory since Thatcher?' *The Observer*, 13 April 1997.

<sup>10</sup> The Conservative opposition have focused many of their criticisms on accusations of centralisation, authoritarianism and interference which they feel New Labour are vulnerable to. The media often give coverage to individuals' complaints about interference in what should be private decisions when reporting Labour policy.

<sup>11</sup> See Blair's book *New Britain*. His post-election 'Speech to the 1997 Labour Party Conference' focused especially strongly on his idea of British identity.

<sup>12</sup> Blair is not the only Centre-Left thinker one who wants to use the old left-wing evil of national identity to re-establish community. Anthony Giddens also sees the nation as the most likely entity to which community identity can be attached in *The Third Way*, cited above, chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> Critical discussions of Blair's idea of Britishness can be found in *Marxism Today* November/December 1998, *Renewal* 3, 3, July 1995, and Mark Perryman (ed.) *The Blair Agenda*, London, 1996, amongst other places.

<sup>14</sup> Hall 'Great Moving Nowhere Show' cited above, and 'Son of Margaret' *New Statesman*, 6 October 1994.